

the only thing different (i've got you now) by everybreatheverymove

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Summary: (Prompt: Reunion fic.) He had no way of knowing, she reminds herself. He'd vanished into thin air, disappeared into oblivion before she could even steal a final look at him. "I have her." She tells him, comforting, "And you've got me."

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"Hop."

The man just furrows thick eyebrows, their bushiness deepening the frown he's already sporting. His eyes are darker now, Joyce notes, a deep grey where cerulean once stared back at her. It's almost as though he doesn't recognize her, isn't even familiar with the sound of her voice.

(She hopes that isn't true, hopes she hasn't lost him completely.)

"Hopper?" She swallows, reaching out a tentative hand to press against his chest. She wants to lay it over the pocket of his shirt, palm flat over the place his heart thumps and beats blood.

(There's that, at least. His blood is flowing, pumping. He's *here*.)

Joyce stands up on her tiptoes then, placing both hands on his broad shoulders. She widens her arms, elbows bent out in order to steady herself, to find her footing on the rubber toes of her sneakers. She runs small hands along his shoulders, back and forth along his clavicles, her own face the picture of anguish.

He's thinner than before, she thinks. Thinner and leaner, but no less imposing. It takes her a moment, but she raises her right hand to his face to cup his cheek in her palm. It's still bigger than the entirety of her hand, her fingers barely touching the short sideburns of his face.

He's almost like a monster towering over her in the darkness, this man — this creature of circumstance, of bad timing — with the rough edges and the ripped clothing on his back. He's all greying hair and cheekbones that look a lot gaunter than she remembers. He's tall where she's short, broken where she's held together with sticky tape; a patchwork person made of trauma and love.

"So long," Joyce frowns, and she feels her throat tighten as her thumb sweeps along his bottom lip. "You need to shave, Hop." She tries for humor, thinks maybe it will break him out of this trance.

"El."

"She's safe."

(He had no way of knowing, she reminds herself. He'd vanished into thin air, disappeared into oblivion before she could even steal a final look at him.)

"I have her, Hop." Her hand falls back to his shoulder then, breath catching in her throat when he lays a hand over her own. His skin is hard, calloused and sore. Joyce closes her eyes, and she steps a foot closer in order to rest her forehead against his chest. "I have her." She tells him, comforting, "And you've got me." She mumbles into his shirt, forcibly ignoring the stench of old sweat and damp air, "Okay?"

(She hates the way her voice sounds; low like it's breaking. But there's a fragility to it that she absolutely loves. She's had to be strong for so long, had to keep gluing the broken pieces of her heart back into place in order to not fall apart. She can be fragile now, even if it's only for a moment.)

(There's a hand on her back now, thick fingers pressing into the denim of her jacket to rub circles along her spine, up and now and up again. It's reassuring and warm, and Joyce knows now that she's missed the comfort of his embrace in ways she couldn't have ever imagined she would. She doesn't remember the last time someone held *her*, needed her in a way that wasn't familial.)

"You can't leave us again, Hop." She says, "We need you. *She* needs you."

Jim clears his throat, gruff in a way only he is. She's missed the husk of his voice, the way he always sounds like he's pissed off or about to threaten someone. She finds comfort in his roughness. "I don't plan on it, Joyce." He nods, and she feels his lips press to the top of her head. "Still got that date, remember?"